

Dramas of Love and Dirt

Soil and the Salvation of the World

Norman Wirzba

“The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it, we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.”

Wendell Berry
The Unsettling of America (86)

“We spend our lives hurrying away from the real, as though it were deadly to us. ‘It must be somewhere up there on the horizon,’ we think. And all the time it is in the soil, right beneath our feet.”

William Bryant Logan
Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth (97)

TRY TO IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE to hear your name every time someone uttered the words “soil” or “dirt.” This is what life would have been like for Adam, because his name makes no sense apart from the soil from which he lives. The Hebrew word for soil is *adamah*. That the first human being was called *adam* meant that the biblical writer wanted us to understand that human life derives from soil, needs soil, and is utterly dependent upon it for food, energy, building materials, comfort, and for inspiration. Similarly, the fact that soil is called *adamah* would have had the effect of reminding human beings that soil also depends on us in certain respects, and that we have responsibilities to it. *Adam* and *adamah* are inseparable.

To read Genesis 2 is to discover that humanity’s fundamental identity and vocation are determined by life in a garden. Human life is created out of the ground as a particular extension of it and is what we might call a “variation on soil” in one of its many forms: “the Lord God formed *adam* from the *adamah*, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and *adam* became a living being” (2:7). *Adam* is not left alone to wander about aimlessly. Instead he is immediately put to work taking care of the soil. “The Lord God took *adam* and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2:15). Two essential formulas emerge: a human being’s identity = soil + divine breath; and humanity’s vocation = soil + gardening work. This biblical story is telling us that the fate of soil and humanity are inextricably intertwined. When soil suffers, so do we. When soil is healthy, creatures have the best chance to flourish. Genesis 2 is not a fanciful story. The witness of history and the findings of ecologists and agronomists confirm it as an indispensable truth.

The etymological connection between *adam* and *adamah* has some resonance in English when we note that “humanity” relates to “humus,” the rich organic layer of decomposing matter that is the top layer of soil. We likely don’t care to be reminded of this reference. Who wants to think of themselves in terms of decomposing plants, leaves, animal bodies, and excrement? But without humus there is no viable terrestrial life. With humus, however, the ground takes in death and, with the aid of billions of microorganisms, transforms it into fertility. In it a vast assortment of processes are occurring that we have barely

begun to understand or appreciate. William Bryant Logan says, “Radical disorder is the key to the function of humus. At the molecular level, it may indeed be the most disordered material on Earth. No two molecules of humus may be alike” (16). And yet, out of this disorder comes life, all the beautiful and terrifying shapes and colors and sizes that make up our world—and us.

Is it any wonder then that God loves soil? It is certainly true that God loves you and me, but when we first meet God in the garden, God is focused on and busy with dirt. God is on God’s knees, hands in the dirt, holding soil so close as to breathe into it the warm, loving, divine breath of life. And not just human life. Plants (2:9) and animals and birds (2:19) come out of the same ground. Soil is the earthly center and connector through which God gardens life into vibrant, beautiful, and delectable reality. God is the first, best, and essential Gardener of the world. The astounding thing is that by staying close to soil, attending to its needs and potential, we have the opportunity to share in God’s gardening ways with the world. To “till and keep” soil is not a burden or a curse. It is the most basic and the most God-honoring work, because when we do it well we participate in and extend God’s life-giving provision in the world. We are each members with *adam*, called to keep our attention and affection on *adamah*. It is what God does daily. To believe the Psalmist—“When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit/breath, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (104:29–30)—the day God ceases to hold soil close is also the day all creation dies. When we cease to care for the soil we not only speed up its ruin, we also bear witness to a basic confusion about who we think God is. We communicate that we disdain God’s gardening presence in our midst.

For much of human history the life-giving bond between people and soil was commonly understood, even if it was not always properly respected.¹ Living in an agricultural world, especially when practicing subsistence agriculture on what can be considered to be marginal land, meant that a soil base and soil fertility were never

to be taken for granted. Soil erosion (whether by wind or water), and soil salination (whether through over-irrigation or improper drainage) were visible, practical reminders of human obligations to take care of the soil. Failure to do so meant personal ruin and communal starvation because healthy soil is the foundation for healthy plant and animal and human life.² Life and land

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were understood to go together because livelihood—the economic patterns and processes that put a roof on one’s head, food on the table, clothes on one’s back, and an offering at the altar—called minds, hearts, hands, and feet always back to the soil. Human desire, what people wanted and expected from life, was daily calibrated according to the needs of land, plants, and animals. For many of us today, living in urban or suburban worlds, it is almost impossible to imagine this land-shaped desire. Put starkly (and too simply), the contrast is between desire shaped by personal ambition and want and desire shaped by plant and animal need and potential.³

Soil calls us to a radical life, especially if we remember that the word “radical” refers to what is central and essential, that which takes us to the roots and origins of life. It also calls us to a humble life, a life in which we come to honest terms with our need and dependence upon others. To be humble is to know that we do not and cannot live as individual egos, through our own resources, and on our own terms. “Humanity,” “humus,” and “humility” are etymologically related because together they show us that we

live at our best when we remember and respect where we come from, what we depend on, and what we must do so that our life and the lives of others can thrive.

Understanding any of this has never been easy. Each year, however, we take a step in this direction when on Ash Wednesday we receive ashes and the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words take our minds back to the story of the “Fall” in Genesis 3, the moment when human beings refused their creaturely life and sought to be like gods. God curses human beings, telling Eve that her pain at childbirth will increase and Adam that his work will now be characterized by toil and sweat. Then God reminds them that they will “return to the *adamah*, for out of it you were taken; you are dust [*apar*], and to dust you shall return” (3:19). There is much to say about what happened at this moment and why it matters. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his valuable commentary on this passage, says, “The word *disobedience* fails to describe the situation adequately. It is rebellion, the creature’s stepping outside of the creature’s only possible attitude, the creature’s becoming creator, the destruction of creatureliness, a defection, a falling away from being safely held as a creature” (Bonhoeffer 1997, 120).

The destruction of creatureliness is a catastrophe because it marks the refusal of our fundamental identity and vocation. Adam and Eve’s rebellious decision, according to Bonhoeffer, amounted to a rejection of who they in truth are and what they are to do. Human beings are creatures, “earthlings” as Genesis 2 describes it, called to take care of each other and the land. When we presume to rise above the earth, as if soil did not matter, or as if the care of soil was somehow beneath us, we forget who we are and where we come from, and in this forgetting bring pain and suffering to each other and to the world.

What should Adam and Eve have done? According to Bonhoeffer, the essential thing was for them to recognize and affirm that they are creatures who need others—most basically for food, friendship, and inspiration—and depend on God for it all. Life is a gift rather than a possession, a gift that we did not make and that exceeds

our attempts at comprehension. The humble reception of gifts is no small thing, because if this biblical story teaches us anything it is that we rather seek to secure life on our own terms. We don’t like to admit that our life is impossible without the nurture and support of others. We prefer to think that we can live on our own and from out of our own ingenuity and resources.⁴ Put another way, we prefer to live in ways that bring glory to ourselves rather than gratitude to others and glory to God. Genesis 3 wants to teach us, however, that all life and we ourselves are gifts from God. We need to learn how to receive such gifts, how to cherish them and take care of them. When we fail to do this—as when we brutalize soil by killing it with ever-more-toxic herbicides and then putting it on life-support with synthetic, fossil-fuel dependent fertilizers—we contribute to the ruin of creation. The Fall is not simply a mistake by our ancestors. It is the disruption of the orders of being because in it we find the transformation of a world of grace into an arena of competitive grasping and arrogant, self-glorifying manipulation.

Not insignificantly, the Bible says that when Adam and Eve sinned that the ground itself was cursed on their account and that soil would henceforth produce thistles and thorns along with whatever else was planted (Genesis 3:17–18). It is important to see that the soil has not itself become evil in some sense: soil continues to be the site and the medium through which God’s creative, nurturing breathing moves. What changes is our relationship to the soil. Human work, rather than aligning itself with soil processes in ways that support fertility and diverse life, becomes disruptive and destructive through numerous forms of mismanagement. “Weeds” and pests thrive because we create the conditions for their success.⁵ In ways that will likely surprise us, scripture presents degraded soil and languishing fields as active witnesses to the disordered and destructive living that we do, whereas thriving soil bears testimony to rightly ordered human living. As the prophets put it, a just culture, one in which *shalom* reigns, is reflected in lands that are beautiful and fruitful. An unjust culture is one in which land and people suffer together.

In the biblical story we see an inability within Adam and Eve to be honest with themselves and their situation. In trying to rise to the level of an autonomous, unencumbered god, they deny the truth—a truth confirmed every time they eat, drink, or breathe—that they are creatures defined by need. Had they been honest with themselves, had they been humble, they would have acknowledged their dependence on humus and their vocation as humans to cultivate and nurture it. They would have embraced life as God’s precious gift and as God’s intimate, animating breath.

To be told, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” is not something that should depress us. It should, instead, elevate us into a more profound sense of our participation in God’s own life. God is constantly attentive to and at work in the soil, animating creatures into the fullness of life. Though we may often be told to “look up” to find God, perhaps believing that God resides far, far away, the truth of creation is that God is never far away. God is near, always lovingly active—like a gardener—in the soil beneath our feet. If we are to believe any of this we are going to have to rethink soil and our relationships to it.

Hans Jenny, one of the greatest soil scientists of the twentieth century, professed at the end of a long and distinguished career that it is almost impossible to give a precise definition of soil. Depending on where you are, the place’s geological history and climate, and the variety of plant and animal life that have lived there, soil will exhibit many diverse qualities. He preferred to describe soil not as a thing but as a web of relationships that goes through varying states of fertility and infertility. It is, finally and irreducibly, a mystery because so many processes and elements and creatures come together to create the diverse conditions in which life can flourish. And the life that arises within and because of it is also unfathomable. Where should we begin?

We can start with a remarkable, though hardly appreciated, observation. Soil absorbs death. Everything that lives dies. Why, then, are we not overwhelmed with the stench of all these corpses? It is because the ground receives death and transforms it—through the miracles

of decomposition and re-composition—into the conditions for new life. Logan writes, “The grave seems to interrupt the human story. But the fact is that graves are motherly for the Earth. They wrap up the things of time and deliver them back to the cradle. So that the show goes on. So that

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nothing will stop the stories from being told” (Logan, 54). This may be small comfort to us, given that we have such trouble facing death. As yet another sign of the forgetting of our creatureliness, we embalm our dead bodies with formaldehyde, thus making our entry into the ground a poisonous presence. Would we and the earth not be better off if we embraced our creatureliness by welcoming the gift of decomposition? This matters because decomposition is the gift of nurture. It is the hospitable gesture that welcomes others into the banquet and dance whereby death becomes the basis and the nurture for new life.⁶

One way to describe soil is to say that it is not stingy. While it holds a bewildering variety of nutrients closely together, it also lets go lightly. If it did not, life could not develop freely out of it. Think, for instance, of what must happen for a seed to sprout and grow. It must, as John put it in his gospel, enter into the soil and die if it is to bear much fruit (12:24). But upon entering the soil it does not enter into a passive medium. The soil is itself active, embroiled in digestive and transformative processes that receive the seed’s dissolution and then nurtures it into plant life. Seeds germinate because the soil is that welcoming place in which minerals, water, clay, microorganisms, worms, and heat already

have been long at work. What healthy soil does is release and bring to light all the possibilities that are latent within any particular seed, even those possibilities (like weeds) that are not to our particular liking or benefit. It takes the seed's potential and works with it. This is why Logan, quite rightly, asserts: "Hospitality is the fundamental virtue of the soil. It makes room. It shares. It neutralizes poisons. And so it heals. This is what the soil teaches: If you want to be remembered, give yourself away" (19).

This is an arresting way of speaking. But we should not be surprised if we believe that it is God's life-giving breath that constantly circulates through soil. Here it is worth recalling that as theologians have tried to understand why God creates at all, the best answer they have come to is that God creates because God loves. God does not create out of some lack or deficiency or out of necessity. God creates freely because God loves for something other than God to be, which is to say that God makes room within God's own life for a reality that is not itself God to flourish and thrive. God's love in creating the world is the most basic act of hospitality because God welcomes life to be itself and be nurtured by all that God provides. The hospitality of soil, we can say, is but one of the material manifestations of God's primordial hospitality in creating the world. To be nestled within fertile soil is to be in a nurturing place that provides the conditions necessary for life to realize its unique potential.

But there is more. Though soil receives death, along with all the so-called "waste" of the world, it also constantly gives what it takes. In healthy soil there is an abundance of air, water, and mineral and organic nutrients. These elements by themselves, however, are not enough. There must also be the geo-bio-chemical processes and the energy—what William Blake called God's "Eternal Delight" (Blake, 34)—that transform tissues into tendrils and trees. This transformative process is well-described as a scene of perpetual offering or as a place in which the giving of elements to each other is the means of life. Insofar as anything remains in isolation or is rendered incapable of being given to another, it remains dead. Life happens only as a transitive movement

because whatever lives does so only as it participates in a process of endless giving. This is why John continues his reflection on a seed's death and life's fruitfulness by observing, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). To love one's own life is to try to claim and secure it as one's own private possession. It is to think, like Adam did, that one's own is the only life that matters and that all other creatures must be manipulated to serve it. This is no life at all. It is, instead, hubris and alienation and needless death. Eternal life, on the other hand, is the knowledge of God (John 17:3) and the intimate sharing in God's hospitable, self-giving life that produces good and beautiful fruit. Eternal life is not an escape from the world of soil because such escape would also signify a departure from the love of God there at work. It is rather the intimate tasting and experience of the fullness and abundance of life that God is (see John 11:25, 14:6).

Soil is the most mundane yet forever mysterious place where we regularly meet God's hospitable love for life. Among contemporary writers, few have seen this as clearly as the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry, who says:

The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future (Berry 1969, 204).

What transformations in us need to occur if we are to learn to perceive and receive the soil in this hospitable manner? Put more broadly, and in the terms suggested by the earlier part of this essay, how can we embrace our creatureliness and so

learn to live more appropriately and with greater humility and gratitude in God's world?

We must start by acknowledging and attending to the many ways in which the patterns of human life reflect an imposition, even assault, on the land. Michel Serres has given us a powerful image to consider as we reflect on the nature of this assault. He asks us to look carefully at Francisco de Goya's painting "The Cudgel Fight Duo." In it two men are at arms with each other,

other. And so we continue in our violent ways, failing to see how this violence is slowly going to destroy us all by burying our hubris and neglect in a vast, desolate ocean of mud. Serres calls this a loathsome culture because it is a culture that abhors the world by working toward global, mutual assured destruction.

The forms of loathing we need to face are multiple. Reflecting on the patterns of settlement that characterized his home state, Berry observes



"The Cudgel Fight"
Francisco Goya, 1820-1823

swinging sticks frantically so as to overcome the other. The duelists are knee deep in mud, or what looks to be like quicksand. "With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don't notice the abyss they are rushing into; from outside, however, we see it clearly" (Serres, 1)

As we look at the painting our temptation is to focus on the men, wondering who will win. As history teaches, it is the man who can exert the greatest force. This is why cultures devoted to "winning" develop vast machineries of economic, political, technological, and military force. Our attention fails, however, because it does not acknowledge the soil and the water, the plants and the animals, that inevitably have to absorb all the violence we exercise against each

how much utter violence has been the American habit. Forests have been felled, wetlands drained, whole species killed to near extinction, and hills and mountains bulldozed or exploded into oblivion. In the space of one to two centuries, we have managed to degrade by erosion and poisoning vast stretches of some of the world's most fertile soil. The main source of our difficulty is that we have not entered our places with humility or with the desire and patience to learn in detailed ways what our places need or recommend. Not being devoted to any place, we have not developed the understanding and the habits that would equip us to live there without destroying it.

Berry argues that for too long we have lived by the assumption that what is good for us is also good for the world, and that personal pride and greed are the primary measures of what is good. We are now seeing that this assumption is a disaster. The world is dying because of our efforts to achieve what we think to be good. The path of correction

must, therefore, begin with a recognition of how wrong we have been in our assumptions.

We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to *know* the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to co-operate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it. (Berry 1969, 196)

If we are to learn to live well on the land we must take up our divinely appointed vocation to take care of God's garden, letting our lives be inspired by God's gardening and hospitable ways with the world, and turning our work into forms of love that extend God's gifts of nurture wherever we are.

NONE OF THIS WILL BE EASY. IS ONE season of Lent each year enough? The movement of repentance must then be followed up with the disciplined self-examination that exposes the many strategies we have for keeping ourselves—our security, comfort, convenience, and ambition—at the center of the universe. It will also require that we resist the many marketing strategies of business, politics, education, and religion that further the sense that the satisfaction of personal desires should be our primary, individual and collective goal.⁷ What forms should such resistance and discipline take?

I don't believe there is one answer to this question. Each person and community, defined as they are by particular kinds of temptation and potential, will need to move forward in ways

that are appropriate to their lived contexts. I want to close, however, by offering some suggestions from what might appear to be an unlikely source: the tradition of monastic contemplation. I think we have much to learn from monks who fled to the desert or wilderness. Their flight was not simply to escape the social and cultural centers that flourished by encouraging pride, greed, and violence. It was so that they could commence on the difficult and concentrated work of self-purification, work that enabled them to subdue the many passions within themselves that prevented them from embracing the world and each other in gestures of genuine love. Without withdrawal and solitude, it was simply too difficult to commence the difficult work of reconstituting one's fragmented life.

In an elegant and far-ranging study of contemplative traditions as they relate to the healing of the world, Douglas Christie writes:

...for the early Christian monks, the language of contemplation provided a way of perceiving existence that encompassed all of reality, that enabled one to attend to the most simple and mundane elements of existence and to see them as filled with significance, as sacred. It enabled one to notice and cherish the *koinonia* or community into which one had been invited to dwell, and to commit oneself to the life and health of the community... The contemplative was invited to *notice everything* and to experience all things as part of a sacred whole. The monks believed that this encompassing, penetrating way of seeing, while possible for everyone, must be cultivated, brought into the center of consciousness through disciplined practice... One could learn to live in the world as a healing presence, attentive, and responsive to the lives of other beings and capable of helping to reknit the torn fabric of existence" (Christie, 6–7)

According to these monks it was possible to be looking and not see because one's looking is so dominated by the "passions," the various fears,

anxieties, hubris, boredom, and ambition that so dominate and shape our ways of relating to others. Rather than seeing another creature or a place for what it is—as the material manifestation of God’s love—all one can see is one’s passions being projected upon them. This is why the real work of contemplation is about truthful awareness and honest perception of self, world, and God.

Maximus the Confessor says, “A pure soul is one freed from passions and constantly delighted by divine love” (Maximus the Confessor, 56). What he means is that a pure soul no longer sees the world in instrumental terms, but is able to see each place and creature as the expression of God’s love. It is to appreciate that God’s love is not coercive or controlling. In making any particular thing, God simply delights in the unique thing that it is and finds joy in seeing that creature realize its divinely given potential. So much of our engagement with others is not for the sake of helping them realize their potential. It is, instead, a dominating of others so that they can help us realize the ambitions we have chosen for ourselves. Our perception and engagement, in other words, by being an imposition of oneself on another, have the effect of frustrating the ability of others to be the creatures they can be.

This is why the monks said over and over again that truthful awareness begins by seeing how the passions contribute to the fragmentation and distortion of the world. This is a painful realization because we must come to terms with our hubris and insecurity, perhaps the deep-seated fear that we are not valued or loved, and so must aggrandize ourselves to even feel we exist. Tears are appropriate in this stage because they are the embodied sign that we are feeling our complicity in the destruction of the world. They are also a hopeful sign, however, because tears further communicate that we are learning to feel empathy and compassion for the many wounds that have been inflicted on others and the world.

As we learn to identify the passions, along with what Evagrius of Pontus called the eight categories of thoughts—gluttony, fornication,

avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride—we can then begin the movement toward an appreciation for how one’s life fits within a larger whole, and that without the depth of relationships that nurture us we could not possibly thrive. To speak of one’s “fit” is to realize that we are not autonomous or self-standing beings but are constantly in relationship receiving nurture, inspiration, and traction from others. It is also to see that as one member within a larger web, we are responsible for being ourselves sites of nurture and inspiration, all so that the webs of life can be strengthened. This amounts to turning oneself into a conduit rather than a siphon of the divine love that is constantly animating our life together. Evagrius said our goal is to move into an awareness of oneself as alive in God. When this happens, one can be said to have entered “the place of God” (Christie, 45).

To perceive a thing is “to allow it to enter into one’s imaginative life so that it becomes part of the fabric of one’s being” (Christie, 146). I can think of no better place for this kind of perception to develop than in a garden. Here, in the patient work of attending to soil and plants, the detailed and sympathetic imagination can develop in which the needs and the potential of creatures can eclipse the self-serving desires that otherwise rule our days. If we want to enjoy fresh raspberries we are best served by caring for the vine. To taste the fruit can then also become an occasion to marvel at the gift of such a delectable experience, an experience that takes place from beyond personal comprehension and control. Having received such a luscious gift, one can then take the next step of sharing the gift with another so that the joy of life together can increase.

There is much more that can be said about and learned from Christian contemplative practices. But we have seen enough to know that if we are going to attend to the soil and meet there the hospitable love of God at work, we are going to have to develop the disciplines and skills that make love incarnate in the world. We are going to have to learn what these monks called the art of detachment, which is the ability to quiet and subdue the ego that so desperately wants to make of another a possession or item of control or con-

venience. Love is the freedom that allows us to respond wholeheartedly to another without the many agendas that serve to inflate our egos. And faith is the disposition and confidence that gives love a home from which to work.

I can think of no better way to end these observations than with the words of Berry, words that sum up the themes of love and attention that have guided us:

Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch. And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest—the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways—and re-enter the woods. For only there can man encounter the silence and darkness of his own absence. Only in this silence and darkness can he recover the sense of the world’s longevity, of its ability to thrive without him, of his inferiority to it and his dependence on it. Perhaps then, having heard that silence and seen that darkness, he will grow humble before the place and begin to take it in—to learn *from it* what it is. As its sounds come into his hearing, and its lights and colors come into his vision, and its odors come into his nostrils, then he may come into *its* presence as he never has before, and he will arrive in his place and will want to remain. His life will grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place, and take its place among them. He will be *with* them—neither ignorant of them, nor indifferent to them, nor against them—and so at last he will grow to be native-born. That is, he must re-enter the silence and darkness, and be born again” (Berry, 207). 🌱

Norman Wirzba teaches Philosophy and Theology at Georgetown College in Kentucky. He is the author of *The Paradise of God* and *Living the Sabbath*.

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Endnotes

1. David R. Montgomery's *Soil: The Erosion of Civilizations* is an excellent treatment of how abuse of soil leads to the destruction of civilizations past and present.

2. Sir Albert Howard's *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* is the classic statement of the connection between soil and plant and animal life.

3. The contrast becomes destructive when the two forms of desire become exclusive. It is possible, and clearly desirable, for them to come together in a well-integrated life. This happens when affection for the land becomes the driving force within us. With the discipline of affection in place the good of self and other *together* becomes possible because one understands that success at another's expense is mutually destructive, while care of others creates the conditions for mutual flourishing.

4. Bonhoeffer describes the attempt by humanity to live like a god in the following way: "It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator... Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness" (115).

5. For an accessible and entertaining examination of human attempts to master land, see Michael Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. Pollan observes that domestication is fraught with complication because it is a disturbance of natural ways and processes. Many of our efforts at farming and gardening create "vacuums" in which pests are uniquely suited to thrive. Or we grow fruits and vegetables that are especially delectable to all kinds of species of insect and animal. The question becomes: is there a way for people to grow food that works with ecosystem processes, learns from them, and so is not a violation of them? The answer is yes, and can be found in various

forms of "natural systems" gardening and agriculture.

6. Wendell Berry observes: "If a healthy soil is full of death it is also full of life: worms, fungi, microorganisms of all kinds, for which, as for us human beings, the dead bodies of the once living are a feast. Eventually this dead matter becomes soluble, available as food for plants, and the life begins to rise up again, out of the soil into the light. Given only the health of soil, nothing that dies is dead for very long. Within this powerful economy, it seems that death occurs only for the good of life. And having followed the cycle around, we see that we have not only a description of the fundamental biological process, but also a metaphor of great beauty and power. It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit. No less than the faithful of religion is the good farmer mindful of the persistence of life through death, the passage of energy through changing forms" (*The Unsettling of America*, 86).

7. Thomas De Zengotita describes in *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live In It* that today's marketing and technological media have the effect of replacing God with Self. In our mediated world we are made to believe that the satisfaction of our every want is the over-riding good. We now live with the flattery of being constantly addressed by marketers, politicians, teachers, and preachers: "everybody who addresses you wants to please you. They want you reclining there, on the anonymous side of the screen, while they parade before you, purveyors of every conceivable blandishment, every form of pleasure, every kind of comfort and consolation, every kind of thrill, every kind of provocation—anything you want. You're the customer, after all, you're the voter, you're the reader, you're the viewer—you're the boss" (268).